

CONSERVATION (PART II)

BOOSTING ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE OF CALIFORNIA FARMERS

A strong Conservation title in the 2007 Farm Bill is essential to a healthy environment in California. Conservation programs in the Farm Bill fill a vital niche by underwriting the voluntary stewardship activities of individual farmers, ranchers and forest landowners. Their actions improve the environment for all Californians by improving water quality, air quality, and wildlife habitat.

California's most popular conservation program is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). EQIP covers a portion of farmers' costs to meet critical environmental needs such as improving air quality by installing low-emissions equipment or improving water quality by reducing runoff. Statewide, unmet needs far exceed available funding – hundreds of contracts representing millions of dollars cannot be filled each year. In 2006 806 applications totaling \$13.4 million could not be funded.

On-the-ground conservation challenges frequently require the participation of more than a single farmer, calling for coordinated approaches with significant technical input. Such cooperative conservation is a hallmark of how the state and its partners achieve environmental objectives in California – through groups such as Resource Conservation Districts, watershed organizations, and other non-profit organizations. New flexible authorities that fund collaborative efforts to implement appropriate solutions – and performance incentives for states that are effective – are required.



Several new initiatives being considered will advance this objective. The proposed Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, Regional Water Enhancement Program, and EQIP Performance Incentives for States – are welcome additions. Similarly, improved Technical Assistance partnerships can join farmers – and associated organizations and agencies with technical know-how – to collaboratively tackle objectives such as improving water quality and water conservation, invasive species, wildlife habitat, and air quality.

Other existing programs such as the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) help landowners restore habitat and sustain wildlife populations. In California, WHIP has enabled landowners to benefit rare species on their property or in conjunction with their neighbors. Unfortunately, funds have been so limited that in the last five years, about 200 landowners that applied for the program were turned away for lack of funding.

Finally, there is a need to continue to implement the Conservation Security Program (CSP) and to craft refinements that make it available to all farmers who want to improve their environmental performance. While more than 500 farmers and more than 247,000 acres are covered under the program in California, the program's complex rules have hampered participation. Program refinements must continue to be made and implemented in the 2007 Farm Bill.

California Supports:

- Increasing EQIP funding to \$2 billion per year and approve the creation of a Regional Water Enhancement Program and Performance Incentives for States to better achieve program goals.
- Expanding funding for Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program to \$1 billion between 2008 and 2012.
- Authorizing improvements to and enrollments in the Conservation Security Program (CSP) between 2008 and 2012.
- Enhancing the delivery and targeting of conservation programs through bolstering technical assistance and flexibility, and adopting the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative.